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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 YEREVAN 000587

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [AM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: KURDISH ACTIVITIES IN ARMENIA

Classified By: Ambassador John Ordway for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

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SUMMARY

1. (S) There is an Armenian-Kurdish friendship society in downtown Yerevan with a sign posted on the door identifying it as such. The "Friendship Society's" main goals in Armenia appear to be to promote Kurdish culture, organize holidays, demonstrations, and campaigns for better treatment of and/or freedom for Ocalan, as opposed to promoting a specific anti-Turkish propaganda campaign. The office, however, openly admitted to us that it represents the Kurdish People's Congress (also now known as Kongra Gel). There is no evidence that Kongra-Gel has either the interest or the ability to fundraise in Armenia. Active recruitment drives, or the establishment of any type of Kurdish military camps in Armenia would be extremely difficult to conduct and hide in a country that is 97 percent ethnically Armenian. Kurds currently constitute a small minority of approximately 40,000, most of whom work as nomadic cattle and goat farmers and live near the poverty level. Approximately 500 Armenian Kurds held a peaceful demonstration in downtown Yerevan on February 15 to mark the fifth anniversary of Ocalan's arrest. End Summary.

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KURDISH POPULATION IN ARMENIA

2. (S) According to Knyaz Hasanov, the Kurdish representative to the executive office of the President of Armenia, approximately 40,000 Kurds live in Armenia (down from an estimated 60,000 in 1989). Many Kurds emigrated either to Azerbaijan (because of the Nagorno Karabakh war, Hasanov told us) or to Russia for economic reasons. The majority of Armenian Kurds live in or near Talin, Ashtarak, Aragats, Aparan and Odketenbuan. Most work in cattle or goat husbandry and have been hard hit by the economic crisis that affects Armenia's rural sector. Hasanov noted that in Armenia there were no successful Kurdish businessmen, Kurdish restaurants, Kurdish supermarkets or even a Kurdish library.

3. (S) Hasanov commented that the majority of Kurds in Armenia are Yezidis, or Christians. While some members of the Yezidi community liked to differentiate themselves from the Muslim Kurds, Hasanov said, he felt that ethnicity, history, and language bonded all Kurds in Armenia together with no visible religious friction. Hasanov felt that the Kurdish population as a whole had a good relationship with the Armenian government. Hasanov did not feel that Kurds suffered discrimination on a personal or official level and, while the Armenian government did not always respond to their requests for funding for cultural events, it would usually at least listen to them. (COMMENT: In our experience, the local Yezidis vigorously differentiate themselves from Kurds, regardless of the obvious connections. Moreover, the indigenous Yezidis and Kurds are quite split. A proposed USDA project to engage them in livestock-related projects faces substantial challenges due to their inability, at least initially, to agree among themselves on how to organize. END COMMENT)

4. (S) Hasanov introduced us to prominent Armenian/Kurds including the chairman of the Kurdish writers association, the head of a Kurdish radio program (which broadcasts for 30 minutes a day), the deputy head of the Armenian-Kurdish Friendship society, a professor of Kurdish language, an engineer, a government bureaucrat and the Armenian head of the local "Friendship Society." All of the prominent Armenian/Kurds told us that they were desperately underfunded, and were able to only sporadically publish three Kurdish language newspapers, unable to fund Kurdish cultural events, and wanted more than the government-allotted 30 minutes of daily Kurdish radio time. All claimed that they had very few contacts with prominent Kurds abroad and that they were unable to successfully solicit funds for their cultural projects. While most agreed that the Armenian government could do more for them as a minority group, none felt that they faced rampant discrimination on a personal or government level and realized that their economic situation

does not differ substantially from Armenians as a whole.

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KURDISH PEOPLE'S CONGRESS IN YEREVAN  
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15. (S) Cherkeze Erash, the administrative head of the office, explained to us that the KPC established its office in Yerevan in 1994 and while the KPC sent representatives from time to time to Armenia, Erash was the long-term representative. (NOTE: He openly admitted to us the connection with KPC. END NOTE.) Presently, he told us, the KPC had two activists who arrived from Turkey, Heydar Ali and Gazim Seyit, who arrived in January 2004 and were planning to stay until May. The office is a Soviet-style three-bedroom apartment located in the center of town, with modest furnishings and multiple posters and banners depicting Ocalan and other prominent Kurdish heroes and "martyrs." Erash explained to us that they had three full-time employees and approximately 22 Armenian Kurds who live in villages outside of Yerevan and work for the office part-time. We noticed one part-time driver with an older Russian vehicle. Erash worked as a professor at a local university to supplement his income.

16. (S) Erash told us that they usually receive 2-3 KPC visitors at a time from Iran, Syria, Europe, Iraq and Russia, who usually stay for one to four months. He said that in 2003 the Armenia office had approximately 15 such visitors. Erash stated that the visitors come to Armenia for the purpose of monitoring the local Kurdish population, give seminars on the Kurdish situation in northern Iraq, and help with Kurdish language and cultural instruction in the villages. Erash described his own job as a coordinator and organizer of Kurdish holidays, demonstrations and overseas visitors. He stated his next assignment was to organize the upcoming Novruz holiday in March, and coordinate the travel of famous Kurdish speakers and/or musicians from Europe to Yerevan for the holiday. When asked about KPC's relationship with the Armenian government, Erash told us that he had good contacts in most government ministries and the Armenian government did not restrict KPC's movement or interfere with their office in any significant way.

17. (S) When we asked about KPC's finances, Erash commented that the local Kurdish population was very poor, and KPC was not able to raise funds in the poor village areas. Erash stated that money for the KPC's office rent came from Russian-Kurdish businessmen, whom he did not name, and/or occasional gifts from European Kurds. Erash lamented that they did not pay salaries at the KPC office, but money from various Diaspora Kurds did defray some living expenses of the key KPC office employees (including Erash himself). Erash stated that KPC visitors and Kurdish entertainers from overseas generally paid their own way and often lived with local Kurds as a way of reducing expenses. Erash told us that the KPC avoids using the local banking system and money was often hand-carried by couriers or by businessmen themselves when they came to visit Yerevan.

18. (S) Rzgán Lezgiyan, a local Kurdish language professor, agreed that the KPC was probably unable to raise much money in Armenia, but criticized the fact that the KPC spent what little money it had to transport village Kurds to Yerevan for pro-Ocalan rallies instead of creating social welfare programs. Lezgiyan stated that most educated Yerevan Kurds did not interact with the KPC office in Yerevan because of its strict pro-Ocalan propaganda. Lezgiyan remembered that in 2002 the KPC office had sponsored five Kurdish students to take Kurdish language courses but suspended the funding when the students failed to show at a KPC organized pro-Ocalan rally. Lezgiyan believed that the KPC office was most influential five years ago when Ocalan was first captured and they were able to attract several thousand people to downtown Yerevan for a pro-Ocalan rally. Since then there had been a noticeable decline in numbers of attendees at pro-Ocalan rallies, which were now only numbering in the low hundreds. The most recent such rally was held February 15, and attracted about 500 participants.

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NEW DIRECTION FOR THE KURDISH PEOPLE'S CONGRESS  
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19. (S) Ali explained to us that his job in Armenia was to travel to the villages and educate Kurds on the new direction of the KPC which was focused on human rights, democracy and freedom. Ali stated that guarantees of freedom were more important than statehood and as long as Ocalan was in good health they would pursue a strategy of peaceful negotiations with Turkey. He then amended his comments by stating that if Ocalan's health worsened or died in captivity then the KPC might have to revise its strategy. He explained that the Caucasus, Central Asia and eastern Europe were in his sphere of responsibility and he traveled throughout this region often. In Armenia his job was to give seminars to Kurds

about news from Northern Iraq and to spread the message of the new KPC policy. He also stated he acted as a facilitator for Kurdish businessmen and looked for investment opportunities, but lamented he did not see many in Armenia. Lezgiyan told us that when he met Ali he noted that the KPC had dropped their demands for an independent Kurdistan and also downplayed the fact that Ocalan was their supreme leader in their propaganda. Lezgiyan speculated that this was done because of pressure from the American government.

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KURDISH PEOPLE'S CONGRESS DENIALS OF WRONGDOING IN ARMENIA  
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10. (S) Erash, Ali, Hasanov and Lezgiyan all strongly denied that there were any camps of Kurdish fighters in Armenia. All stated that it would be impossible to hide a military training camp in Armenian villages where the population was 97 percent Armenian and any large group of strange Kurds would be immediately noticed by the local authorities. Ali stated that it would also be logistically much easier to transport fighters from Turkey to northern Iraq, where they would be safe, receive good medical treatment and have the infrastructure to support them, rather than trying to hide them in Armenia. Ali and Erash also commented that the Kurdish population has a good relationship with the Armenian government, which they would be loathe to jeopardize. (NOTE: In 1999 there was a meeting between the Armenian National Security Service (NSS) and Turkish Intelligence which resulted in meetings and exchange of information. We were told recently by the NSS that this meeting focused primarily on the issue of training camps, and included field visits to sites suspected by the Turkish side of such activity. END NOTE.)

11. (S) Erash and Ali both also strongly denied that there was any drug trafficking by Armenian Kurds and stated repeatedly that this type of behavior is not tolerated in Kurdish culture. Erash claimed that everyone knew everyone in the Armenian Kurdish community, and if Kurdish elders found out about any such activity the offending parties would be immediately expelled from Armenian Kurdish society.

12. (S) Erash, Ali, Hasnaov, and the educated Yerevan Kurds were all in agreement in telling us that due to the poor economic situation in Armenian there was little or no possibility of KPC doing any type of fundraising in Armenia and that the Armenian KPC office relied heavily on donations from Diaspora Kurds to keep their office running, publish their newspapers and help defray living expenses for key employees.

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COMMENT  
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13. (S) Through post's observations as well as through other contacts it appears that the local KPC's office's main goal is to spread pro-Ocalan propaganda. Due to the very poor economic conditions of most Armenians, and especially that of the Kurdish population, it would be difficult for KPC to raise any significant funds in Armenia. Armenia's overwhelmingly ethnically Armenian population makes it equally difficult for the KPC to set up any type of armed camps, or recruiting drives in the Armenian countryside without attracting local authorities' notice. To the best of post's knowledge, the local KPC office does not appear to be actively engaged in supporting terrorist activities from Armenia. The office's official registration as a "Friendship Society" also serves to obscure any actionable connection to the terrorist KPC. The NSS claims to be closely monitoring the activities of the office and has stated that they would immediately arrest and/or deport any member of the KPC office found to be conducting illegal activities.

14. (S) There are, however, two vulnerable points that might be exploited to disrupt, if not actually shut down, this operation:

-- To the extent that we can reliably identify to the GOAM the KPC visitors as members of Kongra Gel, which is on the U.S. terrorist list, we can encourage the GOAM to expel them or prevent their entry into the country.

-- The "cash-by-courier" funding mechanism is another vulnerable point, if we can provide the GOAM information that shows the funding source is Kongra Gel.  
ORDWAY